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SUBJECT: COLOMBIA TO BE SUPPORTIVE IN COPENHAGEN; PROPOSES FORESTRY
PRESERVATION AND RESEARCH ANNOUNCEMENT

REF: S/ECC PERSHING 11/23 CONFERENCE CALL

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Environment Minister Carlos Costa told the Deputy Chief of Mission that Colombia would support U.S. efforts at the UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen. The Minister welcomed the close coordination and openness of U.S. negotiators and indicated the USG could count on Colombia, particularly regarding issues of monitoring, verification, and public disclosure of carbon reduction initiatives. Costa proposed that in Copenhagen the USG announce a joint U.S.-Colombia tropical forest climate change project that would preserve Colombia's vast forests. Such an initiative could develop Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation (REDD) projects that would sequester carbon through avoided deforestation and offer carbon offsets for a future U.S. carbon market. Costa said the project could be established quickly by utilizing an existing conditional community cash transfer program. The Minister noted Norway and France already announced forest projects in Guyana and Brazil respectively. Costa also suggested the USG announce joint scientific research of the impact of climate change on and the potential for carbon sequestration in Paramo highlands -- a delicate high-altitude Andean ecosystem and a potentially critical carbon sink. Costa offered that such an announcement (even if vague) would elevate Colombia's profile and provide the GOC with political cover to push back on unhelpful proposals from G-77 members. The DCM cautioned that time is very short, but he promised to forward the idea to Washington. End Summary.

Colombia To Be Helpful

¶2. (SBU) The Deputy Chief of Mission, accompanied by Economic Counselor and USAID Environmental Team Leader, called on Minister of Environment Carlos Costa on December 1 to exchange views on the upcoming UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen. The DQ praised Colombia's leadership in promoting a successful outcome in Copenhagen and highlighted the importance of a coordinated effort between developed and developing countries. Minister Costa expressed appreciation for the close ties Colombia has developed with U.S. climate control negotiators and indicated the USG could

count on Colombia, particularly regarding issues of monitoring, verification, and public disclosure of carbon reduction initiatives.

¶3. (SBU) Minister Costa noted that Colombia forms part of a sizeable group of middle income developing countries with low carbon emissions. He urged these countries not be overlooked for financial support. Costa noted, for example, Colombia would not support fixed percentage reductions in carbon emissions for less developed countries. He emphasized it is very costly for a hydroelectric-dependent Colombia to further lower its carbon emissions. On the other hand, it is much easier and less costly for a country like Mexico, which largely operates thermoelectric plants, to lower its carbon output.

Joint Proposal in Copenhagen

¶4. (SBU) The Minister suggested that during the conference in Copenhagen the United States announce a U.S.-Colombia forest preservation project in one or more Colombian national parks. The project could help establish a market or supply for businesses interested in purchasing carbon offsets or participating in future REDD projects. He noted that Norway and France already announced forest projects in Guyana and Brazil respectively. The announcement of such a U.S. project would elevate Colombia's profile and influence during the negotiations, particularly among developing countries, Costa argued.

¶5. (SBU) Costa indicated the pilot project could utilize an established conditional community cash transfer program --"Programa Familia Guardabosques" -- or the Family Forest Warden Program. This program currently rewards families not to grow coca, and it could be tweaked to award funds to families and communities that preserve forests. The program currently operates in the Macarena region of Meta, which had been a booming coca-producing AQ in the past and is now one of the frontlines in the GOC's National Consolidation Plan and the USG's Colombia Strategic Development Initiative (SCDI). He emphasized that the program infrastructure, which takes years to develop, is already in place. The Minister indicated that such a conservation-oriented Forest Warden program would be most effective if expanded to Colombia's Amazon region.

¶6. (SBU) Minister Costa expressed interest in learning more about Senator Leahy's publicized letter to Prince Charles regarding \$275 million to fund programs to protect biodiversity and tropical forests, including in the Amazon. The Minister raised concerns about rising deforestation in Colombia as rural areas become more accessible and free of Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) violence. He also expressed concern about the increased pressures on available lands related to the switch from an illicit coca economy to a licit one. For example, rural coca growers that once depended on 1-3 hectares of illicit coca, now require 10-20 hectares for more land-intensive, licit crops and cattle raising to maintain the same standard of living. Costa added there are several opportunities to develop REDD projects in Colombian forests, many of which are located in national parks and other protected areas.

Scientific Research of Carbon Storage in Andean Highlands

¶7. (SBU) Minister Costa offered an additional proposal, and a possible alternative, if the forest climate change initiative is unfeasible because of limited funding and time. He advocated the announcement of joint scientific research on the potential carbon sequestration in Paramo highlands, a subject on which there is little scientific information. This ecosystem, known in English as High Altitude Peatlands, is extremely sensitive to climate change and is found throughout the northern Andes and in limited parts of Costa Rica and Guatemala. Colombia's extensive Paramos are the main source of the country's water supply and are considered to be a potentially important carbon sink. While there is considerable scientific interest in the issue, there is virtually no research on how much and how effectively the Paramo sequesters carbon. He wondered whether the National Science Foundation, Smithsonian Institute, and/or NASA would be interested in a regional or Colombia-specific grant to learn more about the role of carbon absorption in the Paramo.

Comment: Ideas Worth Mentioning

¶8. (SBU) Minister Costa, who departs on December 10 for Copenhagen, is a serious interlocutor and should be a useful ally in the negotiations. A formal announcement of a forestry preservation or research initiative seems unlikely at this late stage. However, a public mention of possible types of cooperation, or potential REDD activities, could empower Colombia and other like-minded countries that want to be supportive at the climate change negotiations.

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